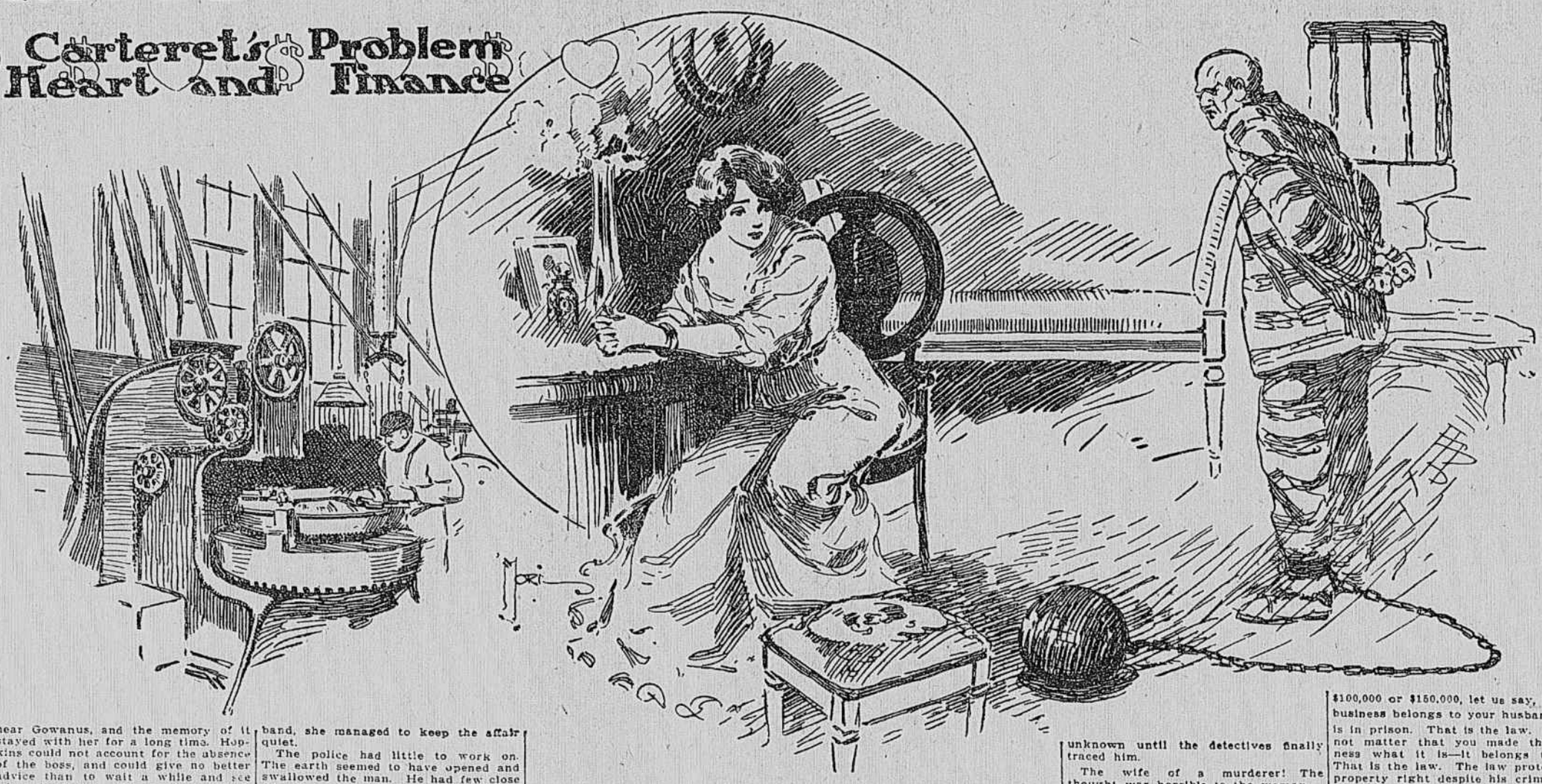
REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

Mrs. Carteret's Problem of Heart and Finance



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

For such a handsomely gowned, daintily shod and stylish looking woman, Mrs. Carteret appeared to some of her fellow passengers to have an odd taste in literature. From the station in Bensonhurst, where she boarded the train at 7:17 every morning, until she got off at Union Street, she usually read Iron Age, Power, Modern Machinery, the Boilermaker or some such publication. If she looked at the morning newspaper she merely glanced over the headlines, and then, turning to the market pages, read with avidity anything printed about the pig iron trade. From the Union Street station she made her way westward toward the malodorous Gowanus Canal.

The first time Mrs. Carteret went to the machine shops, near the canal, she thought it was a frightful place, but she does not think so any longer. Now she prides herself on her business ability. There is not a detail of the work she has not mastered. The management of the big establishment has become part of her life. She would not be content if she had to give it up.

Few women in New York have had a more remarkable experience than has this refined woman, and possibly not one ever has had to face the problem which now confronts her.

On the police records of Brooklyn the Carteret case is one of the great unsolved mysteries. Ask one of the detectives who worked on it, and he will tell you there is no doubt in his mind that Henry Carteret was murdered. There had been a strike in the Carteret shops, and there was a good deal of bad blood, for Carteret was intolerant and savage to those who opposed him. The strikebreakers he had imported provoked the strikers to violence, and then came arrests and prosecution.

It was in June, 1905, that Carteret disappeared. The men had not returned to work, but the backbone of the strike was broken. Carteret had left the shops and had gone to Manhattan. When he did not return that night Mrs. Carteret was not surprised, for he was irregular in his habits. Nor was she alarmed when he failed to appear for several days. She knew he had been under a heavy strain and had been drinking, and supposed so soon as his spree was over he would be back. But when a week passed and she had no word from him she determined to go to the shop and consult Hopkins, the superintendent. That was the first time she ever had been near Gowanus, and the memory of it stayed with her for a long time. Hopkins could not account for the absence of the boss, and could give no better advice than to wait a while and see what developed. The woman waited, but got no news. She was a proud, high-spirited creature, and did not want to be the subject of gossip, so she told none of her friends of her trouble, and when, at the end of two weeks, she went to the police and reported the disappearance of her husband, she managed to keep the affair quiet.

The police had little to work on. The earth seemed to have opened and swallowed the man. He had few close friends and no confidants. His habits were bad and his temper was violent. How he had managed to win so charming a wife was not to be explained. There was nothing to show what business he had to transact in Manhattan. He simply had told Hopkins he was going across the bridge. There the trail ended.

There were gruesome visits to morgues and hospitals for Mrs. Carteret, but without throwing light on the case. Once in the morgue she thought she had found her husband's body, but later she was sure she had been mistaken.

It is marvelous what a woman will do when she is put to the test if she has pride and courage. Firm in the belief that her husband was not dead, she decided, as a measure to prevent neighbors from inquiring as to his continued absence, to change her residence. From the Fort Greene district she moved to Bensonhurst. She had no more than settled this matter than a more serious one confronted her. If the business was not attended to it would go to ruin. The strikers had returned and Hopkins was in charge, but while he was a good superintendent his knowledge and ability did not extend beyond the shop. He could manage the machinery and the men, but knew nothing about the office.

Mrs. Carteret, young and inexperienced, knowing nothing of business except what she had read or had heard in the talk of men, but determined to make it appear that her husband might return at any time, went to the office every day, just as her husband had done, sat at his desk, opened the letters of the Carteret Machinery Company and tried to direct affairs. It all was a frightful puzzle to her at first, for simple things in business have a terrifying effect on some persons, but she was fortunate in having among the office force two very capable employes, one the bookkeeper, the other the stenographer. She was not quick to learn, but what she once grasped she never forgot. It was a shock to her when she discovered the real financial condition of the concern. She had supposed her husband had plenty of cash, but the books showed otherwise and the notices from the bank were unpleasant confirmation of the correctness of the bookkeeper's figures. The concern had been none too prosperous when the strike began. The cost of that struggle had been heavy. The plant was a fair one, and, properly conducted, would bring a reasonable return, but the margin on which to work was small. If she made any costly mistakes it would result in disaster.

She applied herself to the study of the business as she had applied herself to nothing before in her life. Occasionally she blundered grotesquely, but not often, and never seriously. There is a Providence that takes care of sailors, babes and women in business. Mrs. Carteret required care just then and got plenty of it. She was so earnest and so kindly that she won the sympathy of all those around her. The office force never worked better, the men in the shops, sullen and resentful after the strike, warmed to her as they never had to her husband, and Mrs. Carteret, who had begun by considering the shop the vilest place in Brooklyn, had come to have a pride it in. Clear-minded and really capable, she learned more than she realized. She did not make the mistake of overworking herself and making herself a slave to the business. She was systemtic by nature and planned her days in accordance with what she believed would bring the best results.

It is remarkable how fast a person can learn if heart and brain are centred on the object. Within three months Mrs. Carteret, who had not known the difference between a rivet and a jackscrew, was fairly well posted. The business was showing a small profit. Enough new work was coming in to make the outlook promising, and the bank president who, at first, had been skeptical about extending credit to Mrs. Carteret, now was quite warm in his congratulations. The woman was just beginning to grow. All her energies were aroused. Business came to be looked upon by her as something glorious. She read business publications and found in them stories of endeavor, of struggle and of triumph that thrilled her as much, almost, as did stories of action. She saw that even in cold steel and in iron bars there was romance. The works took on a coloring and the whole business a dignity she never before realized, and the glory of it all to her was that she was a part of it, the directing part.

Mrs. Carteret was so busy she did not mourn for her husband. The police, after months of desultory inquiry, had abandoned the case. Mrs. Carteret, employed from 8 A. M. to 6 P. M., had no time to grieve, even if so disposed. She missed him, but was rather surprised that she could think of him without a twinge of sorrow. Possibly some letters she found in his desk made her resentful. Possibly the remembrance of some of the cruel things he had done in their few years of married life had not faded. At any rate, she found plenty to engage her thoughts in her business. At night she read for an hour or two or reviewed the operations of the day, and then outlined, so far as she could, what would be the program for the following day.

For a year she went on in this fashion. The books showed a fair margin of profit, and Mrs. Carteret had come to be considered a real business woman. There was not a department of the concern that she was not thoroughly familiar with. The shops knew her just as well as the office. She always was dainty in her attire. She might go to the office in a beautiful dress, but when she went into the shops she wore a linen duster over it and overshoes covered her low-cut shoes. She had come to know the capabilities and limitations of all her subordinates, and Hopkins had far more respect for her than he ever had for her husband.

It was less than a year and a half after she took charge of the plant that Mrs. Carteret decided upon a radical move. She had read so much that she became dissatisfied with conditions about her. She believed she was not making the best of her opportunities and she was determined on a change. She had gone to the works supposing her husband was a master of the machinery business. She had learned enough by this time to know he was not. He knew less after all his years of experience than she knew.

One day there came to the works a sharp-eyed, trimly built man, who introduced himself to Mrs. Carteret as from a far-famed New York firm. Mrs. Carteret, who was expecting him, was glad to see him, took him about the establishment and explained to all her associates that any and all information the gentleman desired was to be given freely, and that he was to have the run of the plant. The stranger remained nearly a month. When he departed he made a report that Mrs. Carteret read with care. She was paying what seemed to her to be a lot of money for the information it contained, but when she had studied it over she believed every dollar was well spent. The man was an expert in factory management, who analyzed the weaknesses in various lines and suggested reforms. In his report to Mrs. Carteret he planned a sweeping change of equipment in the works and a thorough reorganization in her office methods. Before she could do all he suggested it was necessary for her to consult the banker. He agreed heartily with what she had done and what the expert planned and told her to go a head and not to worry about the financial part of it. Then Hopkins and the others in the factory were startled to learn that multiple drills, radial drills, a traveling crane and a variety of other labor-savers were to be installed. Not only that, but electricity was to take the place of steam. In the office the force there learned that the latest and most improved of office appliances were to be employed and that the most thorough system of filing, indexing and recording was to be introduced.

The Carteret shops, from being conservative, slow-going and conventional, soon blossomed into one of the most up-to-date in Brooklyn. Business increased rapidly. Hopkins and a few of the others who shook their heads when they heard what the new equipment was costing had no idea what an economy was going to result. The new equipment paid for itself in a comparatively short time, and then Mrs. Carteret was able to do a thing she had hoped for a long time—discount her bills. With the best of equipment, with a fair balance in bank and excellent credit, she was able to do a far greater volume of business than the plant ever had done before. There were no leaks, no extravagances, no frittering away of time or money. The woman took a delight in her work, and as the business grew and prospered she was happier than she ever had been before.

Business, no matter how attractive, is not everything. Woman, a young woman, pretty or otherwise, likes companionship. Bensonhurst is a pleasant place with view of pretty lawns, yachts and ocean. Mrs. Carteret had neighbors who were inclined to be sociable and who wondered at the young woman who went so faithfully to town by the same train every business morning, and who read so much, and whose household consisted only of herself and her two maids. Somehow Mrs. Carteret came to know and be quite sociable with first one and then another of these neighbors, and then as business cares became less and less pressing she began to accept invitations to go out, and naturally she invited her newly formed acquaintances to her home. She was a widow, a charming one, and in business they all knew, and that she was well-to-do was evident from the manner in which she lived.

One of the friends Mrs. Carteret made in this way was Mr. Plympton. He was a good, clean living, well principled young man, who admired Mrs. Carteret from their first meeting, and for whom Mrs. Carteret quickly showed a partiality. They were congenial in nearly every way, and their friendship in time ripened into affection. One night when Plympton proposed marriage Mrs. Carteret was startled. With a woman's keenness in such matters she knew a proposal was certain, and she had determined to refuse him, but when the proposal came she realized for the first time that she loved the man, loved him as she had not loved her husband. Instead of rejecting him she suddenly turned to a passionate longing for him, but it was necessary for him to know her story. Then she told him of the disappearance of her husband, of the search, of the years of struggle and of the doubt whether she was wife or widow.

Plympton, secure in the knowledge that the woman loved him, told her there was only one thing for them to do. They must at once institute a search more thorough, more patient than any the police could have made. If Carteret was alive the fact must be ascertained. If he was dead the fact must be established. Surely a man could not disappear off the face of the earth so absolutely and leave no trace.

Mrs. Carteret agreed with him, and they engaged one of the greatest detective agencies in America to take the case. The new search began less than a year ago. Patiently every side of the life of Henry Carteret was gone over by the detectives. Months after months they worked, but made no progress. It seemed as if the mystery was to remain a mystery forever. The detectives, tired of sending reports of failures, ceased reporting. Mrs. Carteret, going to work regularly every day, was a business woman in the business hours of the day and at night gave herself up to social relaxation. Plympton, eager, impatient, chafing at the delay to their marriage, was her constant companion. More and more she was coming to his idea that it was idle to wait longer; that her husband surely was dead. Then early in April there came a letter from the detective agency that almost broke the woman's heart.

The long search was ended. The mysterm was solved. Mrs. Carteret was not a widow. She was a wife. Henry Carteret was not dead. He was alive; a prisiner in Sing Sing serving a life sentence for murder. And then followed the story of the crimes. There was nothing in the murder connected with the strike. Carteret, brutal, savage by nature, had killed a casual companion in a drunken quarrel. When arrested he had given an assumed name. When sober and fully cognizant of all the facts he had determined to do one of the few unselfish things he ever had done—shield all those of his name from being stained by his crimes. He had determined to communicate with no one, hide behind his anonym and so blot himself out. The narrowness of his Brooklyn life and some overtowering sensation of the time helped him in this plan and he was sentenced and went to prison and remained there unknown until the detectives finally traced him.

The wife of a murderer! The thought was horrible to the woman.

Plympton, almost as much upset as Mrs. Carteret, proposed divorce as the only logical thing. Mrs. Carteret, whose pride was great, was fearful the facts would become public and was reluctant to take this action, but in response to Plympton's arguments and pleadings she finally consented.

They went to one of the most prominent lawyers and stated the case somewhat after the fashion that it is here set down.

The lawyer listened until their story was ended and then he spoke.

"If you want a divorce," he said to Mrs. Carteret, "it will cost you a large sum of money."

"I knew it would be costly, but I did not think it would cost a great sum. What do you mean by a great sum?" she asked.

"I mean," he replied, "it will cost you every dollar you have in your business. The business was bankrupt or nearly so when you took charge years ago and you have built it up to where it is prosperous—worth perhaps $100,000 or $150,000, let us say, but the business belongs to your husband, who is in prison. That is the law. It does not matter that you made the business what it is—it belongs to him. That is the law. The law protects his property right despite his crime. The law does this because of the possibility of a pardon; of the possibility of something developing at some time to prove that a man convicted really is innocent. And, to complicate this matter, Mrs. Carteret, you are not heir to this property. Mr. Carteret's mother is living. She is the heir. If you had a child it would be different. The common law prevails in a case like this. Blood comes first. The mother is the blood relation of this man. You are not.

"You have no claim, absolutely none. If you divorce this man, except for your services as manager of this business. You can be dismissed at any time. I am a lawyer and am always looking for business, but it is for you to decide in this matter. The case is unique and would attract wide attention. Study the conditions in the light of what I have told you. And when you decide be sure you decide right."

And Mrs. Carteret, torn by various emotions, is yet to decide.